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Ridiculing Kim Jong Il Doesn't Lead to Peace

By Dorothy Ogle, December 21, 2011



The incomplete and distorted reporting about North Korean leader Kim Jong Il is not fair to him, the people of North and South Korea who long for peace and reconciliation, or to the American people.

Instead of talking about Kim's eating with silver chopsticks while the people of North Korea are starving, we need to be reminded that in 1995, the year after Kim Jong Il came to power, North Korea suffered a massive natural disaster that wiped out cropland, schools, homes, and infrastructure on a scale comparable to Katrina. They have never been able to recover because they have had floods and drought almost every year since then. After last year's harsh winter, heavy rainfall and subsequent floods in October 2011 damaged about 134,000 hectares of agricultural land leaving many children in North Korean countryside severely malnourished, with little chance of survival without access to proper nutrition and medical treatment.

As in the past, Kim Jong Il requested foreign assistance. North Korea has allowed monitoring that shows that the aid reaches the people in need. Before the death of Kim Jong Il the U.S. was poised to resume food aid. Will we now delay food aid for political purposes?

[1]

Before we accuse Kim Jong Il of “starving his people,” we need to remember the size of our own military budget, when we have so many people who are homeless, hungry and without health care in our own country.

Kim Jong Il held summits with South Korea's two “sunshine policy” presidents. As a result, during ten of the seventeen years Kim Jong Il was in power, there was unprecedented inter-Korean cooperation, including the Kaesong Industrial Park just across the border in North Korea. There, 120 South Korean firms hire 48,000 workers to manufacture products that in 2010 produced \$323 million in output. Of this amount there is a revenue stream of about \$20 million that goes to the North Korean government from the salaries paid to the North Korean workers. This kind of economic cooperation can help maintain stability on the Korean peninsula and expose tens of thousands of North Koreans to outside influences. During this time a railway opened from South Korea to North Korea. In 2002 the North and South agreed that private South Korean companies could run tours to Mount Kumgang. Thousands of South Korean tourists visited Mount Kumgang every year bringing profit to both North and South Korea. In July 2005 the North and South agreed to open up more areas to tourism, including Baekdu Mountain and Kaesong.

In 2007 Kim Jung Il and South Korean President Rho Moo Hyun signed an agreement to work on a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice. They even talked about cooperation in the disputed waters of the Western Sea. Unfortunately, South Korean President Lee Myong Bak announced at his inauguration that he would “get tough on North Korea”. He refused to honor the agreements made by his predecessors. Except for the Kaesong Industrial Park, most of the cooperative projects have ended. As a result Kim Jong Il kicked out the international inspectors and resumed his nuclear program. If the “sunshine policy” had continued, the tensions of 2010 could have been avoided.

South Korean peace activists remind us that the military budget of South Korea is comparable to North Korea's entire GNP. North Korea has no way of matching the military might of the South Korea. Now what would you do if you were the president of North Korea?

While North Korea has a policy of Juche, self-reliance, the failed U.S. policy of sixty years of sanctions has pushed North Korea further into being the most isolated country of the world.

South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's vision for “constructive engagement” offered the most hope of bringing peace and prosperity to all Koreans and to the world.

Instead of making Kim Jong Il look like an idiot, we must remember that Secretary of State Madeline Albright characterized Kim Jong Il as intelligent and well-informed, saying the two had wide-range discussions during her visits to Pyongyang when Bill Clinton was U.S. president.

The division of Korea was not the fault of the Korean people. Their country was divided by the U.S. and the Soviet Union at the end of WWII. The suffering of the Korean people has continued for 66 years. Ten million family members were permanently separated; people in the north and south live in fear of war; the resources of their country are used for

military buildup. On both sides of the division, repression has been used in the name of national security. Only in 1987 was there a revolution that replaced South Korea's military dictatorship with a democratic government. The same people who worked so hard for democracy and human rights in South Korea are the ones who are the voices for peace in Korea.

At this time of great uncertainty, when the North Korean people have lost their leader, how we respond, or don't respond will set the tone for the possibility of important negotiations with North Korea. It is very important that the United States and South Korea send a sign that we desire peace. Putting the troops on alert is not very comforting, especially when we have just been conducting military exercises right off the North Korean coast.

We should remember that Bill Clinton sent condolences to North Korea when Kim Il Sung died, even though South Korea's President Kim Young Sam did not, and in fact made it illegal for South Koreans to send condolences. That set the stage for Clinton to get agreements that kept North Korea's nuclear program under the control of international inspectors for eight more years until President George Bush refused to support South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's policy of constructive engagement, and called North Korea part of the "Axis of Evil" at a time when he was invading Iraq.

Military might and sanctions will not work. The only way to end the suffering on both sides is to consider the economic and security needs of both sides, and to negotiate a peace treaty to end the Korean War.

Dorothy Ogle is a former missionary to South Korea who visited North Korea in 1984. In 1987-1988, she served as the legislative affairs coordinator for the National Council of Churches, doing education and advocacy around the 1986 NCC Policy Statement: Peace and the Reunification Korea.

[1]

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